BILINGUALISM VERSUS TRANSLATION

Andreea NĂZNEAN, Ph.D. Candidate,
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract: In translation studies it is frequently supposed that every bilingual person is able to translate any kind of document in an acceptable or even expert way since they possess a special competence for translating. However, there is a considerable difference between bilinguals and translators and the different skills that each of them possesses represent a definite proof. The aim of my research is to examine the characteristics of bilingualism and translation and to investigate whether the two languages that bilinguals possess are a support or an impediment for translation.

Keywords: translation, competence, bilingualism, task, characteristic

In *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, Marisa Presas states that "Any teaching process involves three fundamental elements: the knowledge or skills to be acquired, the learners who will acquire this knowledge or these skills, and the teacher who will guide the learners in the learning process".[1]

Over the years the focus of interest was on the way the students learn, on the problems they face when they learn a foreign language and on the solutions to be found in order to deal with these problems and to overcome them. And researchers have come to the conclusion that one of the causes of these problems the learners experience in their learning process might be bilingualism.

A bilingual person might be regarded as an innate translator, because the bilingual does not only get hold of the competence in both languages, but he/she also acquires the ability to translate from one language into the other. But the achievement of translation competence would involve more than an improvement of this bidirectional bilingual competence because it is not enough to be able to use both languages; translating means much more than that. It is necessary to be able to render the same meaning of the source text in the best possible way in the target text so that it has the same effect on the target reader as it has on the source reader. Consequently, bilingual competence is not in itself satisfactory to assure translation competence, in any case not in the academic sense of the word.

Researchers define bilingualism as the procedure of alternately using two languages and the persons involved in this process are called bilinguals. But this characterization is not so clear because it can refer to different situations, starting with a child who speaks Hungarian with his mother and Romanian with his father, going on with a German student who studies the English classics, or a Romanian IT expert who can understand specialized texts in English, a French doctor who can translate medicine courses from French into English and the list can continue.

[1] Presas, M., (2000) *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, page 19 in *Developing Translation Competence* edited by Schäffner, Ch. & Adab, B, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)

The studies carried out in the past starting with the year 1920 argued that bilingual children did not have such a good evolution in school and had lower intelligence percentage than monolinguals that were publicly better familiarized with the demands of the society. Nonetheless, contemporary researchers present bilinguals as being cognitively more flexible and with a better developed ability for creative thinking than monolinguals. Still, it seems that vocabulary and certain grammatical rules are not the focus of the bilinguals' attention and this aspect cannot be regarded as supporting the improvement of translation competence.

When we refer to bilingualism and bilinguals we must always keep in mind the following characteristics: the age at which the two languages were acquired, whether it was at home or at school, which of the languages was acquired first, the social status of each language and, very important, the level of knowledge accomplished in each of the skills: oral and written reception, oral and written production.

Marisa Presas suggests that bilingualism is a preliminary stage to the development of translation competence: "the translator must achieve *sufficient* mastery of his or her working languages."[2]

1.1.1. Types of bilingualism

The word *bilingual* is commonly connected with a person competent to express himself/herself in two different languages, meaning that bilingualism is characterized by the active or productive function of the two languages. Therefore we must also make a very clear distinction between the *receptive bilingual* and the *productive bilingual* taking into consideration the skills of reception or of production that the bilingual person possesses. And the words *reception* and *production* imply explicitly the reception and production of texts because, when talking about translation, we cannot disregard the communicative function with the sole purpose of emphasizing the linguistic considerations.

Another important aspect we have to bear in mind is the correspondence between the linguistic signs of each language and the mental representations the speaker correlates with these particular signs. Considering the same aspect, Marisa Presas refers to Weinreich's typology which "distinguishes between *coordinated bilinguals* (the speaker associates the verbal signs of each language with separate mental images), *compound bilinguals* (the speaker possesses the same mental image for the signs of both languages) and *subordinated bilinguals* (the speaker associates the verbal sign of one language with the verbal sign of the other and associates this in turn with a mental image)"[3].

Wolfgang Lörscher suggests in his research project *Bilingualism and Translation Competence* that the features that distinguish the *compound bilingualism* from the other two types are a set of significance representations for both languages and two types of expression, one for each language. The *coordinate bilingualism* is characterized by two sets of significance representations, one for any of the two languages, in addition to two types of expression, one for either of the language concerned. *Subordinate bilingualism* is

[2] Presas, M., (2000) *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, page 21 in *Developing Translation Competence* edited by Schäffner, Ch. & Adab, B, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

[3] Presas, M., (2000) *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, page 22 in *Developing Translation Competence* edited by Schäffner, Ch. & Adab, B, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)

characterized by one set of significance representations for the first language. And the type of expression which is representative for the first language helps when learning the one for the second language. (Lörscher 2012: 7-8)

In *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, Marisa Presas refers to the psycholinguistic studies conducted by researchers who have demonstrated that mental images and memory represent a fundamental component of the processes involved in the production and reception of language and she illustrates this process in the following way:

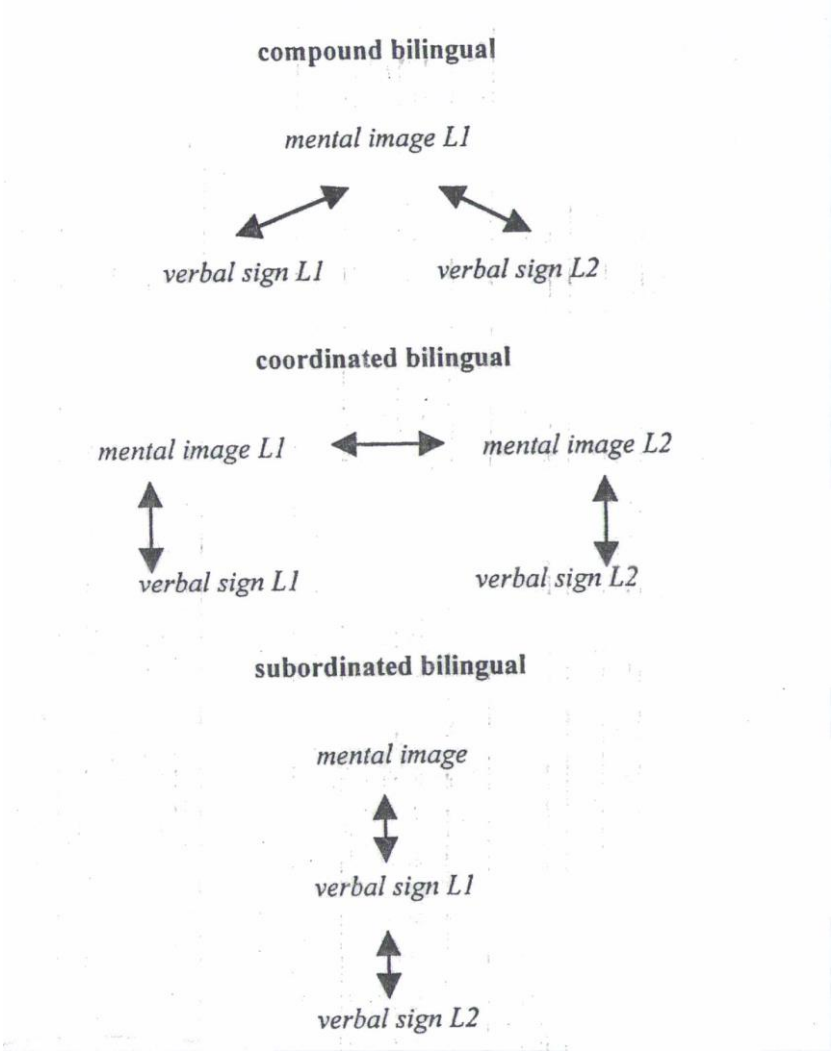


Figure 1. Presas, M., (2000) *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, page 23 in *Developing Translation Competence* edited by Schäffner, Ch. & Adab, B, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)

Psycholinguistic studies have demonstrated that mental images and memory on the whole represent a fundamental element of the processes concerned in the production and reception of language. Thus we might draw the conclusion that the type of bilingual memory which is used would automatically state the course of reception-production in translation.

The ideal state towards which coordinated bilinguals are predisposed is usually regarded to be compound bilingualism. One explanation in favor of this statement would be that psycholinguistics has been inclined to consider bilinguals as language users rather than as translators.

1.1.2. Interference and code-switching in bilingual language

Interference and *code-switching* are two explicit characteristics of bilingual language use which will be the focus of our attention in the following sub-chapter.

Marisa Presas refers to the definitions that two researchers have given to Interference: "Weinreich defines interference, to the extent that it is an individual phenomenon, as the kind of deviation from the norms which occurs in the language use of bilinguals. Mackey defines interference as the use of features of one language while speaking or writing another."[4] It is obvious that in these definitions interference is regarded as the feature which has an effect on the production. Researchers have come to the conclusion that interference influences the acquirement and function of second languages in a negative way.

Interference also has a negative association in the field of translation and is correspondingly regarded as a typical attribute of the translation process, at least of the process of translation carried out by novice translators.

Interference can also take place in direct translation and it has definite characteristics. The first interference happens in reception. The first language interference in the second language comprehension is the cause of the occurrence of false friends, particularly among translators who lack experience. This process can be explained as the connection of lexical elements from various languages without any satisfactory thought of their equivalent mental content. But the second language interference can also affect the production of the first language.

Code-switching is regarded to be the process which alternates the use of two languages in the same context or throughout a particular conversation. Both interference and code-switching involve definite methods. Marisa Presas refers to Baetens Beardsmore's statement that "whereas interference is involuntary and would seem to take place on a subconscious level, code-switching is both conscious and voluntary and takes place in situations that are relevant for the speaker and his or her audience".[5]

Bilingualism means much more than just a competence in two languages, it is also the competence of mediating between the two languages. Bilingualism takes place when a person can use each of the two languages in communication so well that he/she will be regarded as a native speaker in each of the particular speech societies.

---

[4] Presas, M., (2000) *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, page 25 in *Developing Translation Competence* edited by Schäffner, Ch. & Adab, B, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

[5] Presas, M., (2000) *Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence*, page 26 in *Developing Translation Competence* edited by Schäffner, Ch. & Adab, B, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)

Bilingual individuals use their abilities in the two languages they possess in different situations, with different people and for different reasons. There are even bilingual people who are able to speak about a certain topic in only one of their languages. And this is one of the explanations why bilinguals are not good interpreters or translators. In translation and interpretation there are special skills which need to be mastered and the translator and interpreter must possess identical lexical knowledge in both languages involved in the process and most bilinguals lack these skills.

Although bilinguals have competence in two languages, these competences are frequently not of precisely the same type. They might be more experienced in rendering a particular topic in the first language than in the second language. Bilingual individuals are often deficient in the linguistic and cultural consciousness essential for turning a source-language text successfully into a target-language and culture. Bilinguals are competent in two languages, but this does not automatically mean that they are also competent in conveying the accurate meaning and form of a text from the first language into the second language or vice versa.

In his research project *Bilingualism and Translation Competence* Wolfgang Lörscher refers to Toury's investigation on bilingualism, who draws attention to the fact that translation competence does not develop similar to the progress of a child's bilingualism. Bilingualism is regarded as an essential, but not a satisfactory condition for the improvement of translation competence. Consequently, as said by Toury, translation competence can be looked upon as the sum of bilingual competence and interlingual transfer competence. (Lörscher 2012: 6)

A comparison between bilinguals and monolinguals points out that bilingual individuals can change and combine languages, monolingual individuals can change and combine the registers of the same language, bilinguals can translate texts from the first language into the second language, but monolinguals can only rephrase different paragraphs or short texts from one register to another.

Bilinguals have the ability to express themselves orally both in their first language and in their second one so well that they might be considered native speakers of their second language as well. Translators, on the other hand, must read, comprehend and preserve another person's ideas, then render them precisely and entirely in such a way as to express exactly the original connotation of the content and also without any misrepresentation in another language.

Consequently, translators are required to be exceptional readers in a source language and exceptional writers in a target language. Thus, a translator must be able to read and understand a text in a source language, as an example English as his/her second language and then write the text in the target language, as an example Romanian as his first language in such a way as to convey the original meaning in the best way possible.

A good translator is able to understand the source text very well, possesses definite knowledge in the topic of the text and has the required abilities to render the meaning of the source text in the target language in an excellent written way. Furthermore, translators possess skills which are the result of expert training in linguistics or translation studies and these skills make them excellent readers in the source language and excellent writers in the target language.

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)

More frequently, translators must translate texts more from their second language into their first language than the other way round. For example, native Romanian speakers more often translate English texts into Romanian than vice versa. There are organizations which normally give translation projects to one of their secretarial employers who is supposed to be trained owing to their life experiences in living in a foreign country, having studied a foreign language in school or just because they are bilingual. But these employers do not succeed in rendering the original meaning successfully; they might even leave out some of the ideas stated in the original text and their translations may consist of absolute incorrectness.

We can conclude that bilinguals possessing good reading and writing abilities still do not have the required skills to translate different types of texts or documents precisely. Professional translators are required to possess specialized linguistic training in order to perform accurate translations. If translations are assigned to inexperienced bilinguals, they will not be able to convey the precise meaning and nuances of the original texts and documents and there will be misunderstood parts in their translations.

References

Adab, B. (2000) "Evaluating Translation Competence" " in C. Schäffner and B. Adab (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence,* Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Baker, M. (ed.) (2001) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London and New York: Routledge

Bassnett, S. (2002), *Transaltion Studies*, London and New York: Routledge

Beeby, A., Ensinger, D., Presas, M (1998), *Investigating Translation,* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Chesterman, A. (2000) "Teaching Strategies for Emancipatory Translation" in C. Schäffner and B. Adab (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence,* Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Cook, G., (2010), *Translation in Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dimitriu, R. (2002), *Theories and Practice of Translation*, Iaşi: Institutul European

Harmer, J. (2007), *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition), Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited

Kelly, D. (2005), *A Handbook for Translator Trainers. A Guide to Reflective Practice* Manchester, UK & Northampton: St. Jerome Publishing

Kussmaul, P. (1995), *Training the Translator*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

Munday, J. (2008), *Introducing Translation Studies, Theories and Application* (2nd edition), London and New York: Routledge

Neubert, A. (2000), "Competence in Language, in Languages and in Translation" in Schäffner, C. and Adab B. (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence,* Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Nott, D. *Translation from and into the foreign language, LLAS, Centre for Languages Linguistics and Area Studies*

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)

Presas, M. (2000), "Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence" in C. Schäffner and B. Adab (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins
Samuelsson-Brown, G. (2004), *A Practical Guide for Translators*, 4th ed. Multilingual Matters Ltd, UK
Schäffner, C and Adab, B. (1995), "Translation as Intercultural Communication – Contact as Conflict" in Snell-Hornby, M.; Jettmarova, Z.; Kaindl, K., (eds.) *Translation as Intercultural Communication*, Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins
Tonkin, Humphrey, Maria Esposito Frank, (eds.) (2010), *The Translator as Mediator of Cultures*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company

***

Lörscher, W., *Bilingualism and Translation Competence*, in *SYNAPS – A Journal of Professional Communication*, 27/2012, available online at https://www.nhh.no/Files/Filer/institutter/fsk/Synaps/27-2012/Artikkel%201%2027-12.pdf, viewed on 16th July, 2013

BDD-A23407 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:31 UTC)